

WIFREDO LAM: PAINTER OF NEGRITUDE

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The work of Wifredo Lam is an alchemical mixture of Third World liberation, Surrealism and Negritude. The active ingredients are the ideas of Breton and the Surrealists and of Aimé Césaire, the first poet of Negritude. The crucible was *Tropiques*, a journal published during the war by Césaire and his wife Suzanne in Martinique, where all of these individuals briefly came together. The friendship between Lam and Césaire is well known. What has not been remarked is that Lam, though a Spanish rather than a French colonial, followed virtually the same trajectory and bore inside himself the same contradictions as the Negritude writers in his search for an authentic and contemporary Black art. Lam is really the painter of Negritude, and the development of his work, its difficulties and successes, can best be understood in the light of the later history of Negritude.

Negritude began as a literary movement among assimilated Blacks living in Europe. Africans educated in France to the highest level, as were Léopold Senghor and Césaire, the two leading proponents of Negritude, had embraced the humanism of the west, which declares the dignity and essential equality of all individuals, yet found in practice that its values were not upheld. Western culture claims an absolute and universal value, which historically is expressed as an assumption of superiority; but after having destroyed the basis of his culture, the racism of the west then rejects the Black from full participation in western culture. Like a drowning man the Negro clutches at whatever will float. His subjectivity, his Blackness is all that western culture has left him. He finds within himself the unique qualities of Black culture, qualities that had been delineated in the writings of White ethnologists. Poetry becomes a kind of return to an Africa of the imagination.¹

It was in the most advanced western thought that these Blacks found the elements out of which they created Negritude. Senghor, for instance, was frank about the debt that they owed to European scholarship for the recovery of their culture – the same scholarship that we now see clearly as an indispensable adjunct of colonialism, accompanying all its voyages of discovery and conquest. But their thinking also ran parallel to that of the Surrealists, who

were looking to primitive cultures for something to counteract an oppressive and flawed rationality:

But I have to stress over and over again that it was also Europe, that it was France which saved us . . . especially by teaching us the values of Black Africa. It will be remembered that the First World War had, in the view of the most lucid minds in Europe, marked some degree of bankruptcy of civilization, i.e. their civilization, through its absurdity as well as the spiritual and material ruins in its wake . . . Their criticism became radical and extolled the rehabilitation of intuitive reason and of the collective soul, of archetypal images arising from the abysmal depths of the heart, from the dark regions of the groin and the womb . . . The vocabulary of the ethnologists who were just beginning to unveil black Africa's secrets was adopted: like them one spoke of life forces . . . This was all the young Negro elite was asking for . . . We had regained our pride. Relying on the works of the anthropologists, prehistorians, and ethnologists, who paradoxically were white, we proclaimed ourselves in the phrase of the poet Aimé Césaire, 'the eldest sons of the earth'.²

This fruitful exchange between European culture and the Black imagination did not stop when these writers had gained the self-confidence of their newly discovered Negritude. One of the most important documents of Negritude is in fact an essay by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus*,³ written in 1948 as the introduction to an anthology of African poetry edited by Senghor. Though in no way prescriptive and highly sympathetic, Sartre's essay remains the most penetrating and critical discussion of the subject, and one that influenced later generations of Black intellectuals. In it he pointed out the paradox of the Black poet who, in order to communicate with his fellow Blacks spread across the earth from the Caribbean to the Congo, must write in French: 'When the Negro declares in French that he rejects French culture, he takes in one hand that which he has pushed aside with the other.'⁴ Here the Surrealist technique of juxtaposing unrelated images that disrupt the normal patterns of thought provided the weapon that the Black poets needed, the technique that allowed them to use the language of the colonizers themselves against the oppressive persuasiveness of their culture. As Sartre put it: 'Since the oppressor is present even in the language they speak, they will speak this language to destroy it.'⁵ Sartre drives home the point that the Black poet's desire to escape from the 'prison house of language', from language's power to determine his thinking, is rooted in his concrete political situation. The Negritude poet is a Surrealist out of necessity; he does not belong in the European world, and so he seeks the wholly other reality evoked by the shock of the Surrealist image. And for him that imaginary reality is the Africa that once was and perhaps could be again.

If for African Blacks such as Senghor there appeared an easy connection between Negritude and nationalism, for the Blacks of the diaspora the situation was more complex. For them Africa could never be anything more than a vague and distant memory, but one that had the potential to inspire resistance. The first major expression of Negritude was a long poem written in

1938–9 by the Martinican Césaire entitled *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. The violence and vividness of its language quickly placed it in the front rank of Surrealist writing; Breton later described it as ‘nothing less than the greatest lyric monument of our time’.⁶ On one level the work is a spiritual and metaphorical homecoming to Africa; on another it is Césaire’s reconciliation with his own Blackness, which his colonial upbringing had taught him to despise. But it is also about a literal return to Césaire’s country of birth, a journey in which he had to confront the history of slavery and the miserable and defeated condition of his fellow Antillean Blacks:

To go away. My heart was pounding with emphatic generosities. To go away . . . I would arrive sleek and young in this land of mine and I would say to this land whose loam is part of my flesh: ‘I have wandered for a long time and I am coming back to the deserted hideousness of your sores.’

I would go to this land of mine and I would say to it: ‘Embrace me without fear . . . And if all I can do is speak, it is for you I shall speak.’

And again I would say:

‘My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth, my voice the freedom of those who break down in the solitary confinement of despair.’

And on the way I would say to myself:

‘And above all, my body as well as my soul, beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of miseries is not a proscenium, a man screaming is not a dancing bear . . .’⁷

In Césaire’s case, the assertion of Blackness put him sharply at odds with a still existing colonialism and its very painful and humiliating history that could not be forgotten. Even to suggest that Blacks had a right to be proud of their colour was revolutionary in Martinique at this time.

Césaire returned to Martinique permanently just before the war, and it was there in 1941 that he met Breton and Lam, who were refugees from Europe. It was this meeting that cemented the alliance of Surrealism and Negritude; and it was in the pages of *Tropiques* that there occurred the mix of Surrealist literature, radical politics and ethnicity that gave Lam the elements of his style. *Tropiques* contained poetry, criticism and articles that attempted to lay the foundations for an indigenous Antillean culture, interspersed with accounts of the natural history of Martinique. For the first half of its life, from 1941 to 1943, the magazine was subject to censorship by the island’s Vichy government, and this period of political conservatism played an important role in radicalizing the Blacks of Martinique. Part of the French fleet loyal to Vichy was blockaded in Fort de France by the Americans and 10,000 openly racist sailors had the run of the island, upsetting the normal ecology of race relations. In the summer of 1943 a rebellion broke out that overthrew the government and put the island in the hands of de Gaulle’s Free French. The issue of *Tropiques* that came out immediately after this uprising contained an article on Surrealism by Suzanne Césaire, in which she quoted Breton’s claim that ‘the surrealist cause, in art as in life, is liberty’ and that it was due to Surrealism that ‘during the hard years of Vichy domination, the image of liberty did not

totally fade'.⁸ In an interview published in 1978 Césaire was emphatic about the influence of Surrealism and of Breton in particular. At the time of their meeting in 1941 he had 'realized that most of the problems he faced had been resolved by Breton and the Surrealists'.⁹

It is not hard to understand the affinity that Third World intellectuals felt with Surrealism. Not only did it provide them with a technique through which they could find their own voice, but the Surrealists had an ingrained hostility to colonialism. Alone among the numerous avant-garde artists who looked to primitive art for inspiration, the Surrealists seemed to be able to conceive of the non-western, primitive 'other' as a real political force that could play its part in the destruction of a moribund European civilization. As early as 1925, during the Moroccan war, the Surrealists had openly sided with the rebels of the Riff.¹⁰ By the fifties this sensitivity had led both to a reassessment of the whole enterprise of borrowing from other cultures and a special hope invested in those artists, like Césaire and Lam, who by virtue of their ethnic origins could move closer to primitive sources. As Breton wrote in 1955:

Unfortunately, ethnography was not able to take sufficiently great strides to reduce, despite our impatience, the distance which separates us from [primitive cultures] because we remain ignorant of their aspirations and have only very partial knowledge of their customs. The inspiration we were able to draw from their art remained ultimately ineffective because of a lack of basic organic contact, leaving an impression of rootlessness.¹¹

The recognition that primitive art could no longer be appropriated to the needs of western artists must be related to increasing decolonization, particularly the looming loss of France's African colonies, and to the fact that Third World artists, such as Lam and Césaire, were reclaiming their heritage.¹²

Of mixed Chinese and African blood, Lam had a middle-class upbringing in Cuba and a conventional academic training in Madrid. After fighting in the Spanish Civil War he made his way to Paris, where he immediately became Picasso's protégé. It was here, partly through Picasso's influence, that he discovered primitive art, his Paris work closely resembling Picasso's own African period of 1906. Though heavily influenced by Picasso, his work really began to come into its own when he fell in with the Surrealists. His illustrations for Breton's *Fata Morgana*, designed in Marseilles, where he was waiting, with most of the other Surrealists, for passage from Europe, show Lam's break with his earlier Picasso-influenced Africanism. Perhaps through a kind of automatic drawing, or simply thanks to the Surrealists' encouragement of spontaneity, Lam evolved the forms that would become characteristic of his later work. As the *Fata Morgana* drawings reveal, Lam also absorbed Masson's method of blending human figures with plant forms, something that he would find later in Césaire's poetry.¹³

The Surrealists finally found a ship that delivered them to Martinique, where they were forced to stay for some time. Lam eventually made his way back to Cuba and began to paint again, rebuilding his style and incorporating

everything he had learned in Paris and more recently in Martinique. Of all the influences on him, certainly the most important at first was Picasso. According to a 1945 article by Pierre Mabille, a surrealist writer and at that time cultural attaché to the French embassy in Haiti, the only possessions Lam had brought back to the Antilles with him were some reproductions of Picasso's work and a few copies of *Cahiers d'art* and *Minotaure*.¹⁴

Lam was also thinking seriously about African tribal sculpture, but in general he treated this art as a source of forms to be re-used in a very different context and for very different purposes, in much the same way as Picasso and other European painters had. The round-horned heads of Baule Goli masks appear frequently in Lam's work, as does the motif of a bird perched on top of a head found in Gouro masks of the Ivory Coast. Examples of these masks were in Lam's own collection of primitive art, though after his death they were almost all found to be fakes.¹⁵

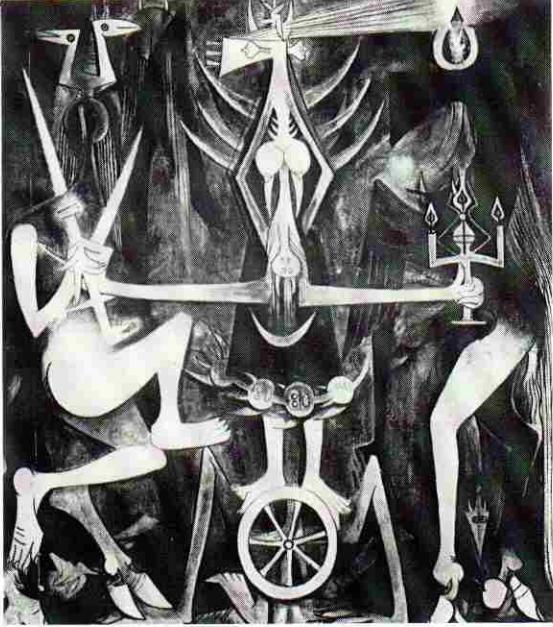
Apart from specific formal features, one quality of African art that Lam especially responded to was its literalness and realism, a quality that Breton in particular despised. The Surrealists found African art too pedestrian and felt that Oceanic art was far better at evoking the terrors of the primitive universe. But Lam, with his partly African descent, searched African art for the elements out of which he could create an authentic contemporary Black art. Here his understanding of how this plastically inventive, non-academic art could at the same time be realist brought him closer to a concept of how his art could serve a concrete political purpose. When Lam arrived back in Cuba, the degradation and misery of the population under the dictatorship of Battista filled him with disgust. Cuba was a playground, and brothel, for the wealthy of America and Europe. As Lam himself said:

When I returned to Havana [my first impression] was one of profound sadness. The whole colonial drama of my youth seemed to be reborn in me . . . What I saw on my return was like some sort of hell. For me, trafficking in the dignity of a people is just that, hell. Poetry in Cuba was either political and committed . . . or else written for the tourists. The latter I rejected, for it had nothing to do with an exploited people, with a society that crushed and humiliated its slaves. No, I decided that my painting would never be the equivalent of that pseudo Cuban music for nightclubs. I refused to paint cha-cha-cha. I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the Negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the Blacks. In this way I could act as a trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters. I knew that I was running the risk of not being understood by the man in the street or by the others. But a true picture has the power to set the imagination to work, even if it takes time.¹⁶

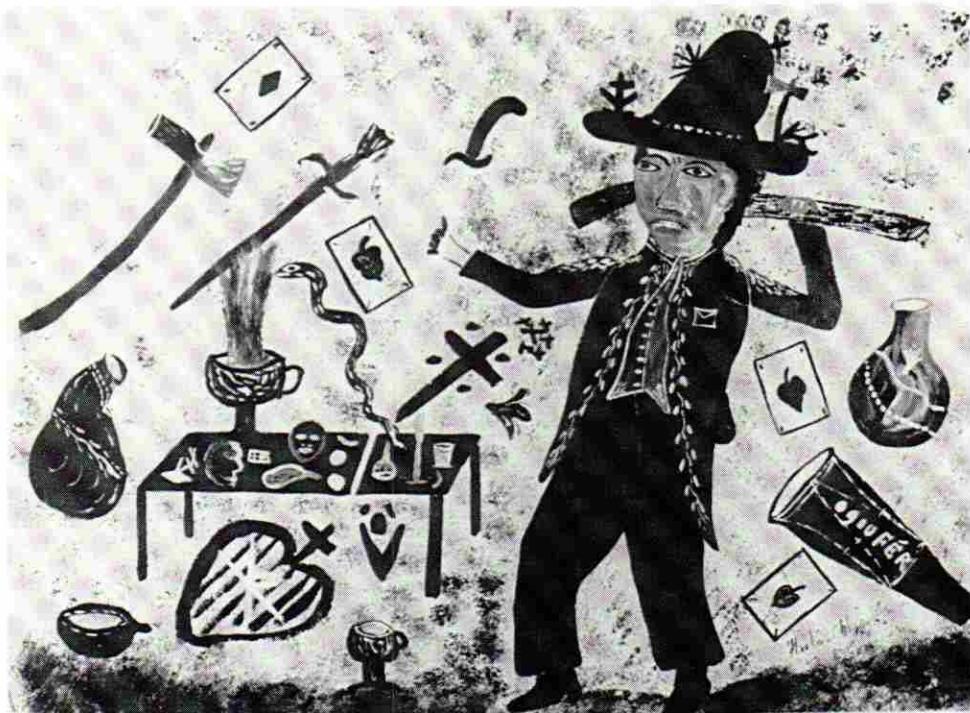
Pictures such as *The Jungle* (plate 17) of 1942–3, Lam's first major piece and a synthesis of all the influences on his developing style, were intended to be seen as literal evocations of Cuban life at that period, and as such political



17 Wilfredo Lam, *The Jungle*, gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 239 × 230 cm, 1942–3. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, Inter-American Fund



18 Wilfredo Lam, *The Wedding*, oil on canvas, 216 × 200 cm, 1947. Berlin, Staatliche Museen



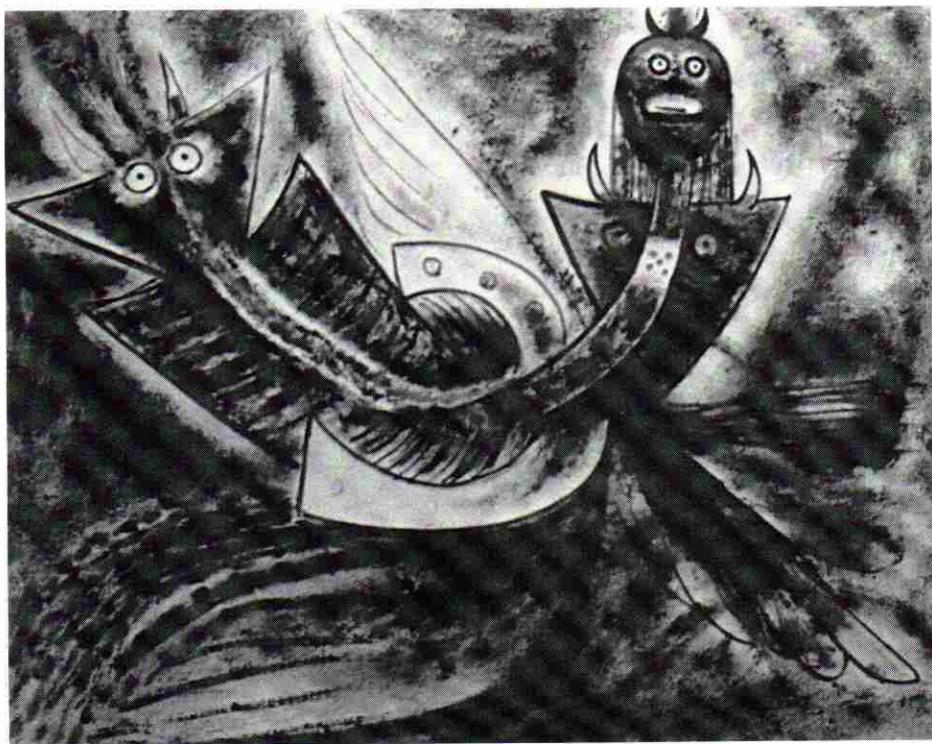
19 Hector Hippolyte, *Ogoun Feraille*, 1944–5 (?). Reproduced in Breton's *Surrealism and Painting*. Present location unknown



20 Possessed Voodoo servitor. Photo: courtesy Robert Farris Thompson



21 Statue of Gù, Dahomean equivalent of the Yoruba deity Ogoun. Photo: courtesy Robert Farris Thompson



22 Wifredo Lam, *Ogoun, God of Iron*, oil on paper, 74 × 94 cm, 1945 (according to Fouchet, painted while Lam was in Haiti). Paris, Private Collection

weapons against the oppression of a colonialism that was only legally ended. Lam describes this piece in the following way:

Rousseau, you know, painted the jungle. He does not condemn what happens in the jungle. I do. Look at my monsters and the gestures they make. The one on the right proffering its rump, obscene as a whore. Look, too, at the scissors in the upper right hand corner. My idea was to represent the spirit of the Negroes in the situation in which they were then. I have used poetry to show the reality of acceptance and protest.¹⁷

The picture is an attack on colonialism comparable to Césaire's *Cahier*: firstly because any assertion of Africanicity by a coloured within the colonial context is an act of defiance; and secondly, or so Lam hoped, through the shock value of its hybridization of plants, animals and people, corresponding to Surrealist use of language.

More directly borrowed from Césaire and his circle are the vegetal motifs and the confusion of plant forms with body parts. In the fifth issue of *Tropiques*, Suzanne Césaire asked 'What is the Martinican?', and answered 'A plant-man':

Above all and everywhere, in the least manifestations . . . trampled but evergreen, dead but being reborn, the plant free, silent and proud . . . In the depths of his consciousness, he is the plant-man, and in identifying himself with the plant, his wish is to abandon himself to the rhythms of life.¹⁸

Trodden down but still living, the plant is a symbol of the patient defiance of the slave; but in the Césairean universe it also symbolizes the nature of African spirituality, in tune with the 'rhythms of life'. Aimé Césaire elaborated further in a 1961 interview:

But I am an African poet! I feel very deeply the uprooting of my people. Critics have remarked upon the recurrence of certain themes in my works, in particular plant symbols. I am in fact obsessed by vegetation, by the flower, by the root. There is nothing gratuitous in that, it is linked with my situation, that of a Black man exiled from his native soil . . . The tree, profoundly rooted in the soil, is for me the symbol of a man who is self-rooted – the nostalgia of a lost paradise.¹⁹

Vegetative imagery economically combines the fact of dispossession and the poetic evocation of Africa. Like Negritude itself it is both historical and redemptive.

Unusually for a literary magazine, *Tropiques* included several articles on natural history. These were intended to stimulate Antilleans to a new respect for their own environment – for, thanks to the colonial education system, they often knew more about France than about their own home. But the presence of these articles in the magazine also reflected Césaire's mystical interest in plants. Lam was certainly affected by these ideas during his stop-over in Martinique, introducing many motifs of the local flora into the early Cuban works, including *The Jungle*. Lam's *Jungle* is still a metaphorical one, however,

for there is no jungle as such in Cuba; what we mostly see in this picture are stems of sugar-cane. In Lam's work, sugar-cane and prostitutes, twin symbols of exploitation in the neo-colonial economy, inhabit the imaginary jungle of Negritude, just as Césaire's *Cahier* had evoked both the Antillean reality and a dimly remembered African home.

In the placement of the figures and their gestures, *The Jungle* is a close paraphrase of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*.²⁰ Lam's remarks quoted above suggest that, like the older painting, *The Jungle* depicts a group of prostitutes. But though the *Demoiselles* may be an important source for the imagery of Lam's work, he is not as interested in Picasso's radical flattening and conceptualization of volume as he is in the actual volumes of African sculpture. The work is partly a homage, coming out of Lam's enormous respect for Picasso, and partly a kind of 'blackening' of the tradition represented by the older master.²¹ When the Negritude writers, imprisoned within the dominant culture, seized on Surrealist technique to make a crack through which they could express their own voice, they were actually widening an opening that already allowed a sporadic two-way flow. European culture had already accepted primitive art into itself, had been colonized in reverse as it were. Now Third World artists were themselves entering this culture and twisting it to their own purposes, effecting a more complete Africanization of western art. Of course, what was really coming into existence was another, global culture. The revolutionary implications of this were an important topic of discussion in Marxist circles during the forties and fifties. In 1948, Sartre had this to say:

In Césaire, the great Surrealist tradition is achieved, takes its definite sense, and destroys itself. Surrealism, a European poetic movement, is stolen from the Europeans by a Black who turns it against them . . . In Europe, Surrealism, rejected by [the proletariat], languishes and expires. But at the moment it loses contact with the Revolution, here in the West Indies it is grafted on to another branch of the Universal Revolution . . . The originality of Césaire is to have cast his direct and powerful concern for the Negro, for the oppressed, and for the militant into the world of the most destructive, the freest, and the most metaphysical poetry at a time when Eluard and Aragon were failing to give political content to their verses.²²

To paraphrase Sartre's remarks, we can say that Lam is casting his knowledge of Modernism, represented by the seminal masterpiece of his friend and mentor Picasso, into the real political turmoil of the Third World. The *Demoiselles d'Avignon* have become the *Demoiselles d'Havane*. The Modernist tradition – revolutionary in the sphere of culture and inspired by the example of primitive art, the spoils of colonialism – fulfils itself as the voice of the native raised in protest against that same colonialism. But what was really subversive about Lam's treatment of Picasso's image, and remains so today, was not his overt political intentions or his stylistic modifications, though both were important. It was the fact that a colonial was aggressively claiming a place within a now global western culture and restructuring the aesthetic debate at the core of that culture in his own terms.²³

Césaire suggested as much in a 1946 article:

In a society where money and the machine have immeasurably increased the distance between Man and things, Wifredo Lam fixes on canvas the ceremony through which everything exists; the ceremony of the physical union of Man and the world . . . Painting is one of the few weapons left to us against the sordidness of history. Wifredo Lam is there to prove it. And this is one of the meanings of this richest of all paintings: that it stops the Conquistador in his tracks; that it demonstrates to this bloody epoch of bastardization its own failure by *the insolent affirmation that something is happening in the Antilles* [italics mine]. Something that has nothing to do with quotas in sugar and rum, with military bases, with constitutional amendments, something unusual, something eminently disturbing to economic agreements and political plans, and that threatens to upset any regime that ignores it . . . One must break with the powerful lovers of post-cards; break with those many who tremble at the thought of a raid from the imagination come to dispossess them of their puny good sense that clings to a cowardly happiness and a stultifying peace. Wifredo Lam doesn't hesitate to take the part of a great disturber . . . Wifredo Lam gives the boot to academies and conformities.²⁴

Modernism in art and anticolonialism in politics, Marxism and poetry, these all co-exist in the moment of Negritude. But this Negritude, a hybrid of African and western cultures, is not content that all cultural influences should be communicated in one direction only. It wants to be heard. And it was how Lam would react to the continued marginalization of the indigenous and the colonized within the internationalism of the later post-war world that would determine the eventual fate of his work.

Lam's absorption in Black culture eventually led him to investigate Voodoo. Within the context of Negritude, Voodoo could be seen as a form of indigenous Black spirituality, but Lam's interest in it also kept him in dialogue with the Surrealists, who were becoming increasingly fascinated with occultism and magic. Voodoo, or in its Cuban form Santeria, is the survival in the New World of a pre-Christian, pre-colonial African vision of the universe. Its complete lack of morality, of the Christian dualism of good and evil, made it especially appealing to the Surrealists. It also represents a tradition of political resistance. Voodoo is most deeply rooted in Haiti, the Black republic that threw off the French at the beginning of the nineteenth century in a slave rebellion which, according to tradition, was planned at a Voodoo ceremony.²⁵ The Voodoo rite is a state of possession in which the servitor is taken over by a Loa or god. The Loas have specific attributes, areas of influence, modes of dress, favourite foods and so on. They are distinct personalities and completely real to the Voodoo believer.

Lam's interest in Voodoo dates from a visit to Haiti in 1944 with Breton and Mabille.²⁶ It was first expressed in a series of still lifes that were actually altars to the Orishas, gods of the Santeria cult, but before long he began to depict the state of possession. A common Voodoo ceremony is a ritual

marriage between a Loa and his or her human devotee,²⁷ an event perhaps portrayed in *The Wedding* (plate 18), painted in 1947. The mood of diabolism and black magic that permeates this picture was the sort of thing that fascinated the Surrealists at this time; myth and the occult were the themes of the major International Surrealist Exhibition of the same year at the Galerie Maeght.²⁸ The rather severe geometry of limbs, swords and circle is derived from the *vever*, a diagram drawn on the ground with flour or ashes that summons the Loa in Haitian Voodoo,²⁹ while the swords and candlestick are borrowed from the altar arrangements typical of Santeria³⁰ – in fact, one of Lam's own contributions to the 1947 show was an altar featuring a pair of swords such as can be seen in this picture.³¹ But though Lam's borrowings from Voodoo were extensive, they were never exclusive and were frequently mixed with the iconography of European painting. For example, Lam often makes hybrid human-horse figures, indicated either by equine heads, tails or hooves. These allude to Voodoo terminology, in which the devotee is called a 'horse', to be figuratively mounted by the Loa in the act of possession.³² This motif appears in *The Wedding*, though here the figures have the split hooves of a goat as Lam combines motifs of Afro-Cuban religion with what must be memories of Goya's scenes of witchcraft, which he had known in Madrid.

The eclecticism of Lam's Voodoo imagery, as well as its association in his work with more conventional western images of demonism, suggests that his interest in Voodoo links him more closely with his European colleagues in the Surrealist movement than with his African roots. Though very good at evoking a kind of general ambience of the occult, his pictures are less effective if we try to determine exactly what they are about. Lam himself was emphatic that he had no interest in the literal meanings of cultic symbols.³³ In Haiti in 1944 Lam and Breton met Hector Hippolyte, a Voodoo *houngan* or priest and painter of devotional images.³⁴ A comparison of a painting by Lam and one by Hippolyte of the same theme brings out the exoticism and the essentially literary nature of Lam's use of Voodoo imagery. Both of these pictures depict Ogoun Feraille, an avatar of Ogoun, a Yoruba deity translated into the Voodoo pantheon. Hippolyte's image is literal and contains many of the god's attributes, such as swords and quasi-military dress (plate 19). When compared with a photograph taken in 1975 of a possessed Voodoo believer sitting at a small table distributed with skulls, bottles and playing cards used in divination (plate 20),³⁵ Hippolyte's painting can be seen to be a truthful transcription of the ambience of Voodoo. It also exhibits direct iconographic survivals from African images of the same god (plate 21).³⁶ Lam's picture was reportedly painted during the visit he made to Haiti with Breton in 1945, when they had met Hippolyte and attended Voodoo ceremonies,³⁷ yet it is a mélange of African masks and Modernist devices, none of which are related to the subject (plate 22). The only trace of Ogoun is a horseshoe that alludes to his status as the god of iron. But most importantly, and somewhat surprisingly, Lam's work eliminates the overt political associations of Ogoun who, characterized as a martial hero, is linked with the historic liberators of Haiti.³⁸ These two works reiterate in the Third World context the difference between the Modernist and the popular artist. Hippolyte's image is readable, literal and has a certain

obvious craft of representation. Above all, for him Ogoun is a real person with very specific attributes. By contrast, Lam's work is synthetic and imaginative; he is a modern intellectual who plunders pictorial motifs from folk culture in order to use them in an entirely different context. He certainly has no personal experience of Voodoo possession, which would have given him a first-hand knowledge of the characteristics of Ogoun.

But looking at Hippolyte further we find other ambiguities in his situation. Although more directly in touch with his African heritage than Lam – he is after all Black and a citizen of a state that had been independent from Europe for 150 years – he yet evinces considerable anxiety in his own search for authentic Black roots. He told a story of travelling to Africa, where he spent seven years communing with the Loas on their home ground. He also claimed to have walked across the continent from Senegal to Ethiopia.³⁹ With its echoes of Garveyism, the back to Africa movement that swept the Caribbean in the twenties and thirties, this story is probably a fantasy. It is safe to say that if he had ever actually visited Ethiopia, where the poverty is even deeper than in Haiti, that particular nostalgia would have evaporated.

Though Lam's intentions and his thematic and formal sources are clear, his desire to connect with his African roots is problematic because his experience of Africanness is so mediated by western culture. But the experience of Hippolyte suggests that even for a West Indian Black without Lam's or Césaire's degree of acculturation, the problem of authenticity is acute. No degree of atavism can wish away the real historical damage caused by slavery; for a Black of imagination, whatever his education, Negritude as a dream of homecoming to an Africa of the spirit is an inevitable and natural response to that damage.

There is a psychosexual dimension to the question of Blackness in the colonial world, one that seems to inflect Lam's work in ways of which he was perhaps unconscious. Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist and, like Césaire, a native of Martinique, has analyzed the sexual complexes created by colonialism, complexes that affect both Mulatto and Black.⁴⁰ In the rigid colonial or post-colonial society, colour is tied to an economic and political hierarchy. The land-owning class is white and on the top; Mulattos form a middle class of functionaries and merchants; the Blacks are at the bottom and, of course, labourers. Whiteness has an absolute value, both socially and psychically: Black women want only to marry a man lighter than themselves; Black men likewise are attracted to lighter women. Through marriage to a lighter partner one's family and children are moved higher up the social scale. This whole neurotic complex causes great pain for the Blacks. Their culture has been crushed and their very being has been labelled by White civilization as inferior; in the west the simple colour black bears negative associations. The colonized Black suffers under an immense inferiority complex, which naturally involves sexuality as a component of an identity that has been negated.

As much as Césaire and Fanon, Lam felt all of this acutely, but he also suffered the ambiguity of his status as a Mulatto, a shifting position within the sexual hierarchies of colonialism. On one level, Negritude is a simple reversal

of the Black's self-image. In every respect where White culture has labelled him bad, he asserts that there is his identity, and that it is good. As White society has repressed Blacks both socially and sexually, it has also identified Black sexuality as a force negative and threatening enough to require repression in the first place. For the Black, then, dreams of liberation inevitably have a highly sexualized character. In its affirmative aspect, the poetry of Negritude is replete with images of potency:

Suddenly now strength and life assail me like a bull and the water of life overwhelms the papilla of the morn, now all the veins and veinlets are bustling with new blood and the enormous breathing lung of cyclones and the fire hoarded in volcanoes and the gigantic seismic pulse which now beats the measure of a living body in my firm conflagration.⁴¹

On the other hand, colonialism is identified with castration,

Oh Yes the Whites are great warriors hosannah to the master and to the nigger-gelder!⁴²

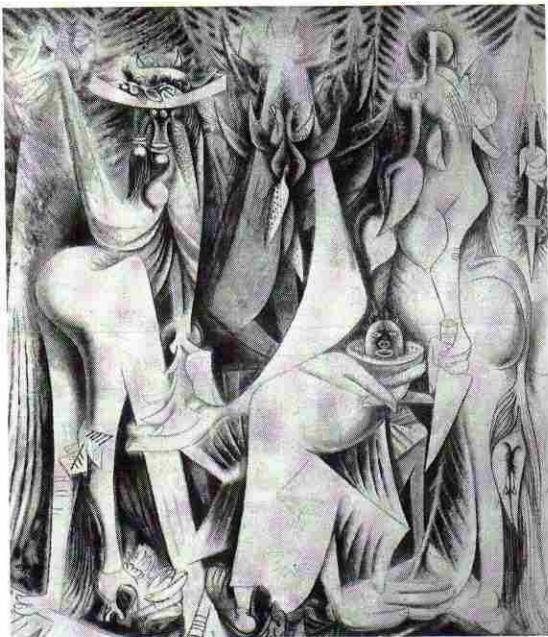
and life under colonialism is suffused with impotence:

At the end of the wee hours, life prostrate, you don't know how to dispose of your aborted dreams, the river of life desperately torpid in its bed . . .⁴³

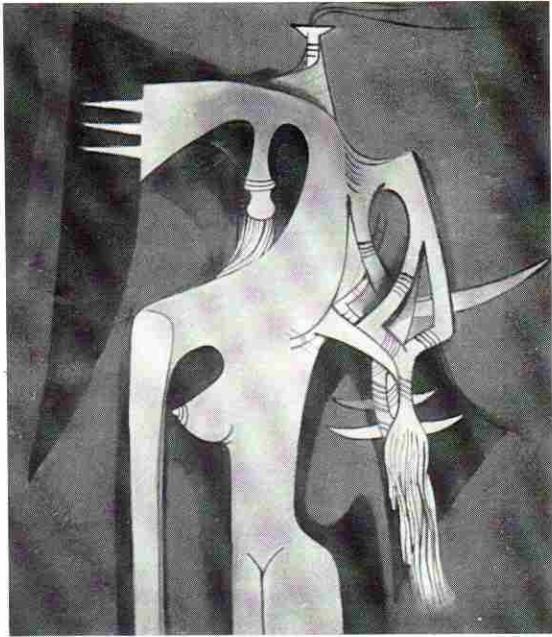
For Lam, with his mixed descent, the situation was not quite as clear as it is for a Black. His description of a painting of 1945, *The Eternal Presence* (plate 23), gives us some clues to the imagery of his work and the psychology behind it:

The figure on the left is a stupid whore. With her two mouths she feels ridiculous. From her heart comes nothing but an animal's paw. In her heterogeneity she evokes cross breeding, the degeneration of the race. The figure on the right has a knife, the instrument of integrity, but he makes no use of it, he does not fight. He suggests the indecision of the mulatto, who does not know where to go or what to do. The vessel on the right, full of rice and with a head emerging from it, represents religion, the mysteries. And in the central figure with folded limbs we can see the dream . . . in the upper right corner I placed the symbol of Shango, the god of thunder.⁴⁴

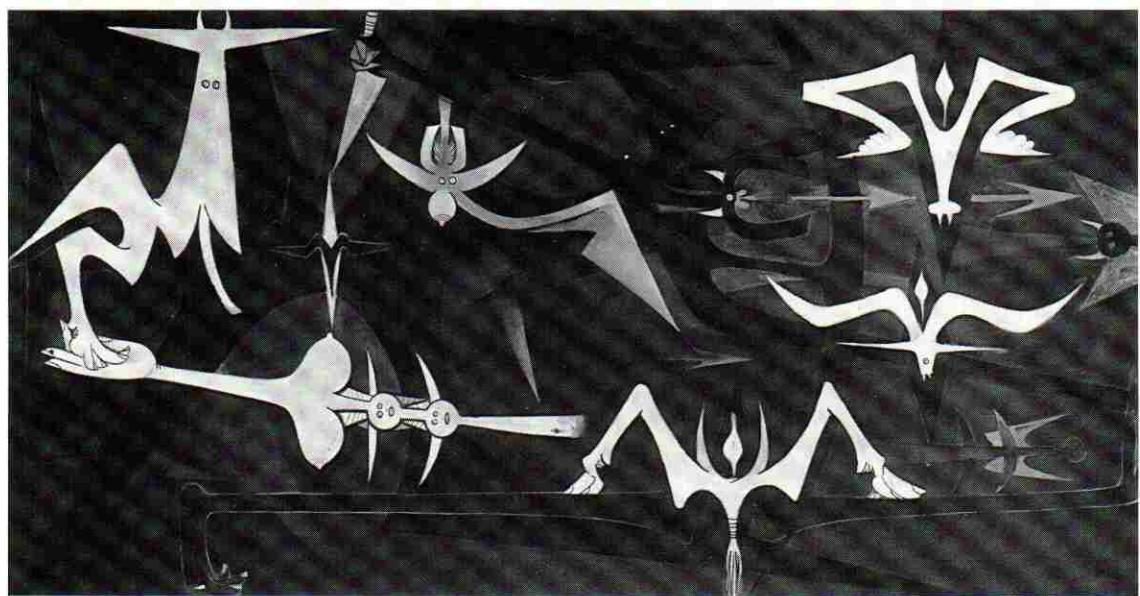
A Freudian reading of this description would notice his revealing association of the two outside figures. If the Mulatto were to fight, he would attack the 'stupid whore'. Lam is expressing his ambivalent feelings towards the woman who marries out of her race, as his mother did, and his resentment at being stranded in the ambiguous role of Mulatto as a consequence. Lam also betrays an insecurity about his own sexual role; the Mulatto, whom Lam refers to as 'he', is clearly female. The sexual neuroses of colonialism, combined with White sexual fantasies, made Mulatto women the favourites as prostitutes. When Lam returned to Cuba there were 60,000 prostitutes in Havana alone.⁴⁵ The picture, full of vulva and knife forms, is a nightmare of castration; the whore herself has a huge cleaver. The battle of sexual dominance, castration, rage and seduction permeates Lam's imaginative world and he seems to be



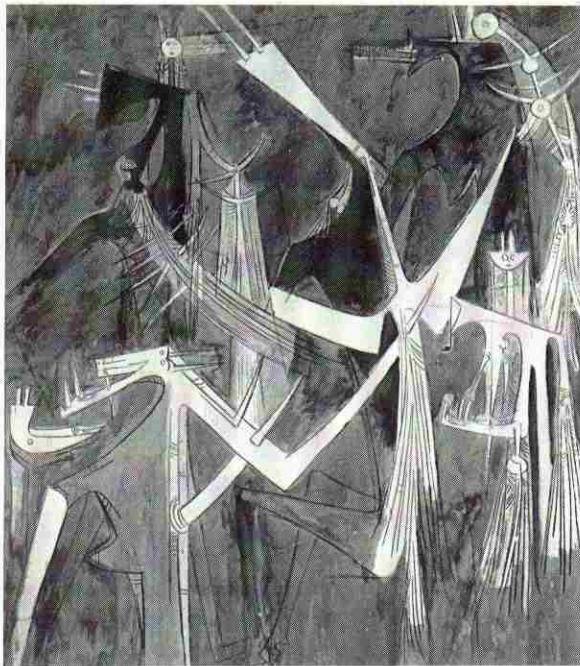
23 Wifredo Lam, *The Eternal Presence*, oil on canvas, 217 × 197 cm, 1944. Rhode Island School of Design, Museum of Art, Nancy Sayles Day Fund



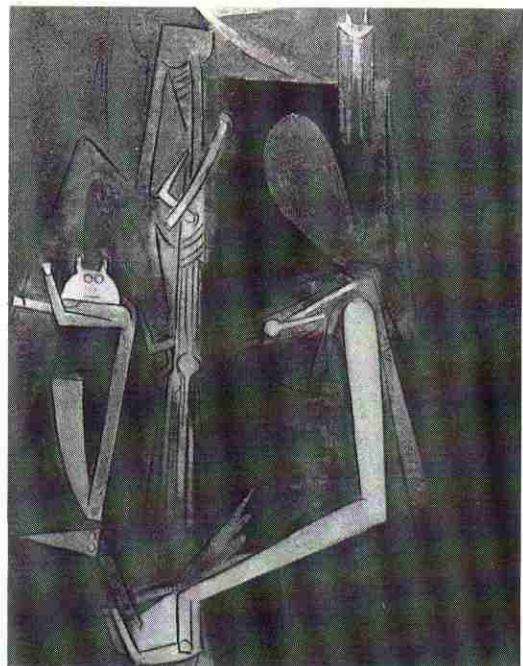
24 Wifredo Lam, *Zambezi-Zambezi*, oil on canvas, 124 × 109 cm, 1950. USA, Private Collection



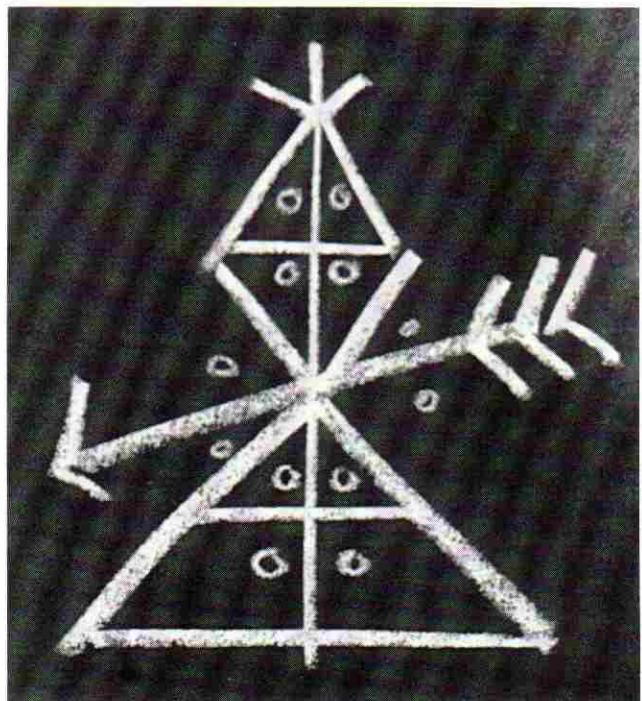
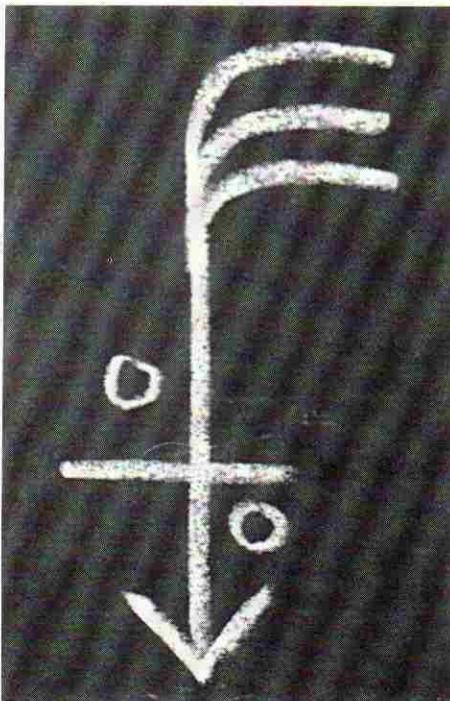
25 Wifredo Lam, *Murmur of the Earth*, oil on canvas, 151 × 282 cm, 1959. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, gift, Mr and Mrs Joseph Cantor



26 Wifredo Lam, *We Are Waiting*, oil on paper, 280 × 270 cm, 1958. Paris, Private Collection



27 Wifredo Lam, *Osun and Ellegua*, oil on canvas, 93 × 74 cm, 1962. Italy, Private Collection

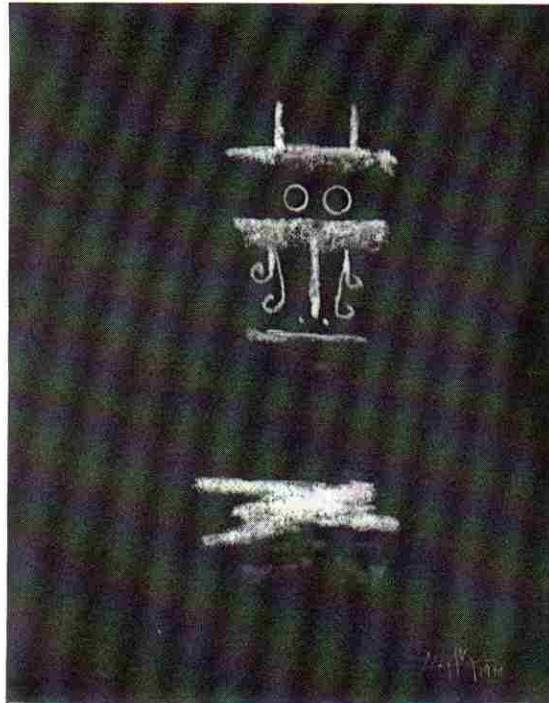


28a,b Abakua ideographs. Photo: courtesy Robert Farris Thompson

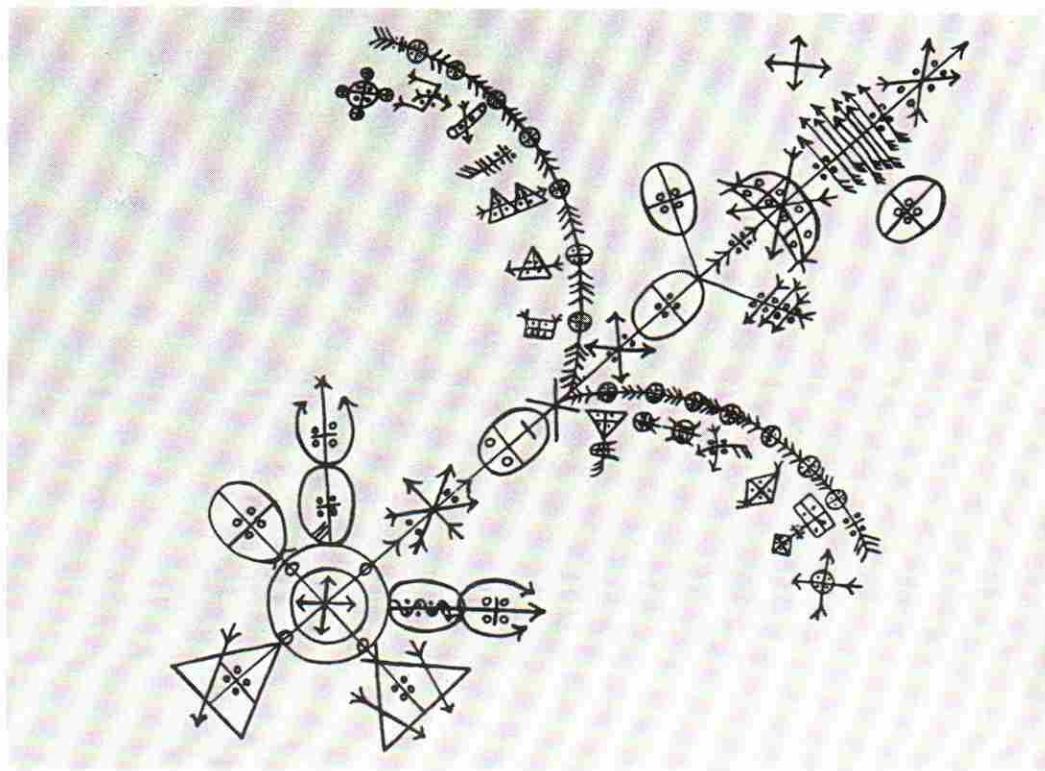
trapped within it. He cannot externalize his conflicts and draw a simple equivalence between sexual and social oppression any more than he can securely identify himself as Black, White or Chinese, for part of himself belongs to each of these cultures. The reference to Shango, and Lam's adaptation of the cult image of the God Ellegua, the small head in a vessel, to which he has added the horns of a Baule mask, again point up the literary nature of Lam's Voodoo borrowings, layered as they are on top of an image of angry and ambivalent sexuality. Nevertheless, in its anxiety and its exposure of the sexual neurosis of colonialism, *The Eternal Presence* does make contact with the real experience of oppression.

In the late forties and early fifties Lam made many pictures of seated or standing female figures, often structured according to a light/dark contrast. In *Zambezi-Zambezi* (plate 24), for example, we can see a black shadow figure behind the white foreground figure. In Lam's primarily tonal rather than colourist art, black and white have a symbolic value. We could read the black figure in the background as the ancestral presence, the God who takes possession of the devotee; but it is hard not to see the picture also as emblematic of Lam's conflicts. He is attracted to the White woman of Europe, for colonialism has made her desirable above all others; yet his deeper feelings are pledged in loyalty to the Black woman of Africa, to whom he is tied by blood. The bestiality of Lam's women certainly refers to the 'horse' of Voodoo possession, but it also expresses the fear and repulsion that must be mingled with attraction to both White and Black women in this socially and sexually conflicted situation. In *Murmur of the Earth* (plate 25) we can see a similar two-level structure, but a much more violent imagery. The picture can be read as an image of possession: the goat-like hooves allude to sacrificial animals used in the Voodoo ceremony, the light foreground figures to visible human beings in postures of convulsion, the darker forms behind representing the invisible Loas. But the extreme light/dark contrast of this highly abstracted yet violently sexual image certainly reflects the sexualization of race that possesses Lam's psyche.

Breton seemed to regard Césaire and Lam as possessed of an inspiration inaccessible to Whites, which itself indicates the spell cast by Negritude and the myth of Blackness. Though far more analytical than Breton, Sartre, in *Black Orpheus*, also extended a kind of special dispensation to the poets of Negritude.⁴⁶ According to Sartre, the Black's awakening to his own subjectivity is a necessary part of the historical process, and therefore in essence political. The Black is even entitled to that subjectivity, and entitled to celebrate it in poetry, in a way that the White proletarian is not. It is as if what Russell Jacoby has called the missing subjective dimension of Marxism can only be found in Negritude.⁴⁷ This subjectivity is not to be confused with bourgeois individualism for it does not express the feelings of the individual, but the self-consciousness of the race; and the force of that awakening self-consciousness must inevitably lead to confrontation with colonialism and finally the identification of the interests of the colonized with those of the working class everywhere. For Sartre, Negritude, though necessary and valuable in itself, is thus only a stage in the historical struggle, a stage that



29 Wifredo Lam, *Emblema de lané*, pastel on black paper, 65 × 50 cm, 1978, Paris, Private Collection



30 Abakua ideograph. Photo: courtesy Robert Farris Thompson

must be succeeded by another in which the mystifications of the Black myth give way to objectivity and concrete political action. Césaire himself was explicit on this point: for him there was no break between his activities with *Tropiques* during the war and his later political life – one led inevitably into the other.⁴⁸ But the story of Negritude, of Césaire and Lam, is the story of how the subjectivity of the poet finds a particular balance against the objective forces of history. It was this balance that had always preoccupied Breton; the source of his enormous regard for Césaire was his recognition that for this poet the relation between the artistic and the political revolution was less problematic than it was for Breton himself. But for Lam the balance seems to have shifted for the worse as time went on. As his work became increasingly populated with motifs drawn from Santeria, it also lost its connection with its social context. This process became especially pronounced after the Cuban revolution, when Lam's Negritude became more a matter of the mystifications of the Black myth and African religions and less one of revolutionary self-definition.

In Battista's Cuba, Lam's ghoulish nocturnes with their animalistic women could serve as metaphors for the condition of life in an oppressive and exploitative society, and Voodoo possession, the eruption of African gods from the collective memory of the oppressed masses of Blacks, could be a symbol of the social upheaval taking place, the popular revolution of those former slaves against their neo-colonial masters. Some of the pictures from 1958 and 1959 are among Lam's best; their titles, such as *We Are Waiting* (plate 26) and *Early Hours of the Dawn* even seem to allude to the history taking shape at that time. It is later, during the sixties and seventies, that Lam's occultism, like that of his Surrealist friends, begins to wear thin. Though Lam's borrowings from Santeria costumes and ritual objects are exhaustive, the degree of detachment implied by his very conscious synthesis of motifs becomes more and more obvious, as is exemplified in a work such as *Osun and Ellegua* of 1962 (plate 27). The bird is an osun, a sculpture of a bird normally placed on the end of a staff used in the cult of Osanyin, the god of herbalistic medicine.⁴⁹ The little head in the figure's other hand represents an icon of the god Ellegua – usually a small cement or clay head sitting on a plate.⁵⁰ This display of artifacts is more akin to ethnographic painting than a convincing expression of Afro-Cuban spirituality.

Another important ethnic source for Lam was the Abakua, an Afro-Cuban secret society. Echoes of Abakua ideographs (plate 30) can be found in the arrows and branching symmetrical shapes of a picture such as *Murmur of the Earth* of 1950 (plate 25). But though Lam's works often appear ideographic, they do not express the cultic meanings of the Abakua symbols, in which he had no interest. One series of drawings from the late seventies (plate 29) is directly derived from Abakua drawings in white chalk on black paper (plate 28a, b), yet it is typical of Lam's synthetic approach that these drawings also seem to respond to some of the work of Picasso's last period. This comparison is emblematic of Lam's later work, always circling between his European and his ethnic roots but failing to find that particular relationship between the two traditions that gave the work of the forties, such as *The Jungle*, its political meaning.

Fanon was strongly affected by Sartre's *Black Orpheus*, and his reading of it

marked his disillusionment with Negritude. It is Fanon's experience as an educated Black in racist European society, and his analysis of the psychosexual damage inflicted by colonialism, that opens up to us the unconscious content of Lam's work and the significance of its bestiality and sexual obsessiveness. But as a Black of a younger generation who came to reject the mystifications of Negritude, Fanon also provides the medium for reflection back on the meaning of Negritude in its context and what later became of it. At the First Conference of Negro Writers and Artists in 1956 Fanon gave a psychosocial analysis of Negritude:

The culture put into capsules, which has vegetated since the foreign domination, is revalorized. It is not reconceived, grasped anew, dynamized from within. It is shouted. And this headlong, unstructured, verbal revalorization conceals paradoxical attitudes.⁵¹

These paradoxical attitudes are the ambivalent self-image of the Negro under colonialism and the Black intellectual's intimate relationship with the culture of the colonizer. Yet for Fanon this is a very important stage since for the Negro 'the plunge into the chasm of the past is the condition and source of freedom' and 'the logical end of this will to struggle is the total liberation of the national territory'.⁵² For Fanon, Negritude does not give way to the universal class struggle, as Sartre had suggested, but to a more active anti-colonialism. Five years later, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon laid out the cultural programme for revolutionary Africa, stating that 'The native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities'.⁵³ This is where Césaire and Lam had begun, with the reality of colonialism, but increasingly throughout the fifties and later, Lam's work, however accomplished it becomes, fails to live up to this ideal.

Lam supported the Cuban revolution but kept his distance from it. In 1967 he organized an exhibition in Havana at which the entire Salon de Mai of that year was shown, and in 1968 he participated in a cultural congress in Havana at which European intellectuals demonstrated their solidarity with the revolution; but he lived mostly in Europe, finally settling in Italy. In later years, Lam shows himself primarily an excellent designer, producing variations of his stock motifs that sold very well. His late pictures are usually hybrids of animals, human figures and African sculpture without any background or context; where they appear, the plant motifs which filled the backgrounds of the works of the forties with their powerful symbolism, inherited from Césaire, have become ornamental. These works, spectral presences looming in the night, are formally very beautiful with their reduction to two or three tones keyed to a dark ground, but Lam had become a solitary star drifting far from that constellation of political and creative forces that made his art revolutionary in the forties.

History eventually caught up with Negritude. In 1945 Césaire took his seat in the Chamber of Deputies. In 1959 Battista was overthrown in Cuba and in the same year Senghor became president of Senegal. Later definitions of Negritude reflect these political changes. In 1962, for instance, Senghor

described Negritude as ‘the sum total of the cultural values of the Negro world’.⁵⁴ This very general, rather vague definition befits the leader of an emergent African state that is in the process of rethinking its political and economic structures, for this was the period when there was much talk about an indigenous African Socialism, and Senghor’s polite formula is in line with his liberal and Pan-African policies. How different Césaire sounds; in a 1971 interview he said simply that ‘Negritude is the affirmation that one is black and proud of it’.⁵⁵ This assertion of blackness is still a challenge to the *status quo*, doubly so within the neo-colonial situation of Martinique. Césaire has remained centred in an attitude that opens out into both an aesthetic and a political position; he has sustained the possibility of a historical subjectivity.

Throughout the fifties and sixties, as one after another of the former colonies achieved their independence, there was heard the same refrain of universalism, whether in the Marxist sense of a universal revolution (*vide* Sartre), or in the dream of a United Nations in which all indigenous cultures could play an equal part. As Senghor said in 1961: ‘[Negritude] must be the contribution from us, the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa . . . to the building of the Civilization of the Universal’.⁵⁶ It was inevitable that Negritude should issue out into a kind of universalism, for the idea that African culture can be considered apart from European culture is a fiction. Black culture has been continually affected by its contact with Europe over the last five hundred years. Though the Black intellectual can scarcely escape this fact, the ingrained racism of the west will hardly admit that the opposite is also true. African culture and European culture are essentially different yet intertwined and inseparable; the very history of Negritude itself is a dialogue between both cultures. But it is the essence of Césairean Negritude never to lose sight of the particularly Black experience within this larger context.⁵⁷ During a period in the fifties Césaire also showed a preoccupation with Voodoo and Black mysticism, but after the upheavals in Africa at the end of the decade he temporarily gave up poetry and began work on a series of dramas based on episodes from Black history.

Yet the history of the post-war world is also marked by the overarching global market economy’s attempts to eliminate the specificity of local cultures and draw them into a universalism that is the inverse of Senghor’s utopian hopes. The slave trade, the historical trauma that haunts Negritude, and especially the poetry of Césaire, was itself only an early stage of this process. Sartre was right to argue that Negritude represented a stage in the historical evolution of Black consciousness, but the new international order conceals yet another form of colonialism, in which all local cultures are still suppressed even as the art market opens up to their products. In the world of the multi-national corporations signs of ethnicity are national trade marks as all cultures become equally commodified. The global culture is really western culture, still triumphant over a Third World now colonized through the mass media and a global market place. For even as the old Negritude dies away in the concrete achievements of Black nationalism, the Black artist finds himself confronting a world-wide culture industry that will not admit the fullness of Black culture into itself without adaptation, and certainly will not surrender to the margins

any power to inflect the debate at the centre. Césaire holds open the possibility of resistance to this situation precisely by clinging to a notion of Negritude as subjectivity grounded in real historical experience.

In his later years Lam does not offer the same hope. Although he was in no way alienated from revolutionary Cuba⁵⁸ his work seemed to have little to say to it, and was really more at home in the European art market. Perhaps Lam had always been too closely tied to Europe, but the way in which his work increasingly became a manipulation of motifs and less specifically about the Antillean experience certainly smoothed its success outside of Cuba.

Like Breton, like Césaire, Lam stubbornly claims that meaning lies in his subjectivity in a period when on one side the logic of the Marxist argument declares it obsolete, and on the other the relentless commodification of capitalism renders it increasingly hollow. His inability to express that subjectivity in historical terms after 1959 was his inability to cope with a changed political situation, albeit a very difficult one. But for a moment, in the forties, a Black subjectivity born of the meeting of Black historical experience with European culture became an effective instrument of both the creative revolution and anti-colonialism. This should remind us that there are a multitude of local conditions and local aspirations that have not yet been brought into line with multi-national capitalism and that there is a history of Modernism that is the history of its encounter with this wider world.

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NOTES

Robert Linsley is an artist and writer living in Vancouver, Canada. This paper grew out of a seminar conducted by Professor Serge Guilbaut at the University of British Columbia in 1986–7.

- 1 For a discussion of this mechanism, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markham, New York, 1967, ch. 5.
- 2 L. S. Senghor, 'Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine' in O. R. Dathorne and Willfried Feuser (eds.), *Africa in Prose*, London, 1969, p. 341.
- 3 J. P. Sartre, *Black Orpheus*, trans. S. W. Allen, Paris, 1951.
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 26.
- 6 André Breton, 'Martinique charmante des serpents, un grand poète noir', *Tropiques*, no. 11, May 1944, p. 122. All quotes from *Tropiques* are my translation from the Facsimile Edition, Paris, 1978.
- 7 'Notebook of a Return to the Native Land', Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (trans. and ed.), *The Collected Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, University of California, 1983, p. 45.
- 8 Suzanne Césaire, '1943: le Surrealisme et nous', *Tropiques*, nos. 8–9, October 1943, p. 15.
- 9 Interview with Jacqueline Leiner, *Tropiques*, facsm. edn., Paris, 1978, p. VI.
- 10 During the famous uproar of the St Pol Roux banquet, Michel Leiris' cries of 'Down with France' mingled with shouts of 'Up the Rifls' and 'Bravo China', referring to another current colonial rebellion. Maurice Nadeau, *History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard, London, 1973, p. 128.
- 11 André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. S. W. Taylor, New York, 1972, p. 333.
- 12 This last quotation is taken from an article on Gaulish coins to which Breton was looking for evidence of an indigenous European abstraction. After relinquishing African art to the Africans, Breton was trying to find inspiration in the primitive art of Europe. It would be reasonable to ask whether or not the same political factors played a part in the European primitivism of Cobra. Parallels between Lam's ethnicity and that of the Cobra artists, with whom he was in touch, have been drawn: see Per Hovdenakk, *Wifredo Lam Retrospective*, Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1983.
- 13 Illustrated in *Arts Magazine*, December 1985, p. 24. There are only five copies of this book in existence, one in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

14 Pierre Mabille, 'La Jungle', *Tropiques*, no. 12, January 1945, p. 183. A motif that recurs again and again in Lam's work, including *The Jungle*, is a phallic shape hanging down from a pair of lips – a motif probably borrowed from Brancusi's *Adam and Eve*, the top half of which was originally developed as a portrait of a Negro singer. However, *Cahiers d'art* of 1938 had a long section on Picasso which included some of the *Drawings for a Crucifixion* of 1929, in which the features of a woman's face are arranged in a phallic configuration. This is an issue that Lam probably owned.

15 William Rubin, *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York, 1984, p. 14.

16 Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam*, New York, 1976, p. 188.

17 ibid., p. 199.

18 Suzanne Césaire, 'Malaise d'une civilisation', *Tropiques*, no. 5, April 1942, p. 45.

19 Aimé Césaire, *Cadastre*, trans. Emile Snyder and Sanford Upson, New York, 1973. In 1955 the flower of the *basilier*, an indigenous Martinican tree, was chosen as the emblem of the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais, Césaire's party.

20 The figure on the left has her arms extended upwards in a gesture similar to that of the woman holding open the curtains in Picasso's piece. The second figure from the left and the figure on the extreme right have their arms folded behind their heads like two of Picasso's figures, and the second figure from the right has her body and head back to front, just like the crouching presence in the lower right-hand corner of the *Demoiselles*.

21 Thanks to Serge Guilbaut for suggesting this reading.

22 Sartre, op. cit., p. 39.

23 It is ironic that this painting was bought by the MOMA from its first exhibition in New York and that it has hung there along with the *Demoiselles* for over forty years without provoking comment on the nature of the relationship between the two pieces. A certain family resemblance has been noted, however. See Evan Maurer on the influence of primitive art on Dada and Surrealism, William Rubin (ed.), *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art: The Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York, 1984, p. 583.

24 Aimé Césaire, 'Wifredo Lam', *Cahiers d'art*, nos. 20–1, 1947, p. 357.

25 C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins*, 2nd edn., New York, 1963, p. 86.

26 Fouchet, op. cit., p. 205.

27 Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, New York, 1953, appendices.

28 Marcel Jean, *History of Surrealism*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, London, 1960, p. 341.

29 Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, New York, 1983, p. 188.

30 *Art in America*, March 1987, p. 25 illustrates Cuban ritual paraphernalia exhibited at the Second Havana Biennial.

31 Jean, op. cit., p. 342.

32 Deren, op. cit. Aline Vidal suggests that the figures in *The Jungle* have horse heads, and that they are 'without doubt possessed by a Loa' (*Wifredo Lam Retrospective*, Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, Paris, 1983, introduction). Mabille, in his 1945 article in *Tropiques*, also talks about *The Jungle* in terms of Voodoo. However, though other works of this period do clearly show figures with horses' hooves, I do not think that references to Voodoo are an important feature of Lam's work before 1944. One of Césaire's poems published in *Les Armes miraculeuses* of 1946, called 'The Virgin Forest', seems to include a description of *The Jungle*. In this text the figures are described as ape-like. Eshleman and Smith (trans. and eds.), *The Collected Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, University of California, 1983, p. 131.

33 Fouchet, op. cit., p. 204.

34 Breton bought five of his works and included him in the 1947 exhibition. Jean, op. cit., p. 341.

35 Thompson, op. cit., p. 184.

36 Thompson, op. cit., pp. 166–7.

37 Fouchet, op. cit., p. 252.

38 Deren, op. cit., p. 125.

39 Selden Rodman, *Miracle of Haitian Art*, New York, 1974, p. 28.

40 For this description, and for the following discussion, I am indebted to Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markham, New York, 1967.

41 Aimé Césaire, 'Notebook of a Return to the Native Land', *Collected Poetry*, p. 77.

42 ibid., p. 61.

43 ibid., p. 41.

44 ibid., p. 204.

45 Fouchet, op. cit., p. 183.

46 Sartre, op. cit.

47 Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology*, Boston, 1975, ch. 4.

48 Interview with Jacqueline Leiner, p. VIII.

49 Thompson, op. cit., p. 46.

50 ibid., p. 23.

51 Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier, New York, 1969, p. 42.

52 ibid., both quotes p. 43.

53 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, New York, 1968, p. 225.

54 L. S. Senghor, 'Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine', O. R. Dathorne and Willfried Feuser (eds.), *Africa in Prose*, London, 1969, p. 341.

55 Susan Frutkin, *Aimé Césaire: Black Between Worlds*, University of Miami, 1973, p. 1.

56 L. S. Senghor, 'Discours devant le Parlement du Ghana, février 1961', John Reed and Clive Wake (trans. and eds.), *Léopold Sédar Senghor: Prose and Poetry*, London, 1965, p. 97.

57 It was the lessons of Black history that for Césaire set the terms of the debate within the French Communist Party between Social Realism and Modernism. In 1955 René Depestre, a Haitian poet and friend of Césaire, had come out publicly for the official line in literature. In a poetic reply, Césaire defends his aesthetic by linking it with the slave revolt in Haiti:

It is a Seine night
and as if in drunkenness I recall
the insane song of Boukman delivering your
country
with the forceps of the storm ...

Boukman was the Voodoo priest who touched off the revolt on the night of a wild tropical storm:

shall we escape like slaves Depestre like
slaves?
(marronnerons-nous Depestre marronnerons-
nous?)

Here Césaire coins a new verb from 'marrons', who were bands of runaway slaves.

Depestre I indict the bad manners of our
blood
is it our fault
if the squall hits
suddenly unteaching us to count on our
fingers
to circle three times and bow ...

The storm is the poet's Blackness, his subjectivity which he cannot deny. But this subjectivity cannot adapt itself to a programmatic form without being suppressed. Here Césaire gets in a dig at Socialist Realism in general:

Comrade Depestre
It is undoubtedly a very serious problem
the relation between poetry and Revolution
the content determines the form.

and what about keeping in mind as well the
dialectical
backlash by which the form taking its
revenge
chokes the poem like an accursed fig tree.

In 1956 Césaire quit the party. He had found that he was expected to subordinate the needs of his Black constituency to the programme of the European party. History makes the point that the interests of Third World peoples will never be a consideration in European politics. The French Communist party refused unequivocally to support Algerian independence; and Césaire could remember that Napoleon invaded Haiti in 1803 under the tricolor, in the name of the Revolution, expressly to reinstate slavery. This is the political background against which Césaire invokes Negritude, subjectivist Black poetry, as 'marronner'. Eshleman and Smith (trans. and eds.), *Collected Poetry*, University of California, 1983. For a more detailed treatment of this incident, see A. James Arnold, *Modernism and Negritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire*, Harvard, 1981.

58 In a 1965 address Che Guevara spoke approvingly of Lam's Africanism, *Granma*, Havana, 16 October 1967, p. 17. In the opening address to the Salon de Mai of 1967 at its exhibition in Havana, Raoul Roa, then Minister of External Relations, spoke about the compatibility of revolutionary Modernism with the political revolution in Cuba, and affirmed 'the right of artists and writers to freely express reality'. *Granma*, Havana, 31 July 1967, p. 2.

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